

No blade of grass – 1970 film

After establishing himself as a reliable leading man in glossy entertainments like *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) and *Forever Amber* (1947), Cornel Wilde embarked on an unusual directorial career in which he turned out eight films over a twenty-year period, each one falling into a different genre. Wilde often cast himself as the leading man, never afraid to put himself in an unflattering light, and pulled off at least one solid hit, the grueling survivalist drama, *The Naked Prey* (1966), and two underperforming but fondly remembered films, the 1963 costume epic *Sword of Lancelot* and the 1967 war drama *Beach Red*. By the time he reached the pessimistic 1970 science fiction drama, *No Blade of Grass*, the brutality simmering in all of Wilde's films finally erupted full force thanks to the increasingly lenient film ratings system and a confused studio system trying desperately to appeal to a youth audience.



Still shocking by today's standards, the film stars Wilde's wife and frequent co-star, Jean Wallace, as Ann Custance who, along with husband John (Nigel Davenport) and their children, flees London after enduring increasingly brutal food and resource shortages following a grass-ravaging plague. At a friend's farm in Scotland they intend to find solace but instead encounter a vicious group of bikers and average people quickly descending to savagery. Along the way Wilde depicts the results of a pollution-bred blight on the light via cutaways to corrupted rivers and landscapes, with Roger Whittaker's eerie theme song offering a wistful counterpoint.

Visual and narrative experimentation were certainly nothing new to Wilde by this point, as *Beach Red* dabbled in wartime surrealism long before *Catch-22* (1970) and *M*A*S*H* (1972) made such an approach palatable, and *The Naked Prey* was executed virtually without dialogue. However, *No Blade of Grass* proved to be quite radical even by 1970 standards; having not learned their lesson with *Zabriskie Point* (1970), MGM apparently had no issue with the film's non-linear cutting and frequent split-second flash forwards (a device utilized the same year in Dario Argento's *The Cat o' Nine Tails*) to convey a feeling of dread and precognition for the audience.

Wilde also continues to refine his exceptional eye for scope compositions, often filling the Panavision frame with surprising choices in which characters intrude into view from unusual angles.

Typical of the politically conscious climate in 1970, *No Blade of Grass* makes no attempts to camouflage its ecological message, discreetly tweaked from the biological warfare gone awry concept of the source novel by John Christopher. Though reminiscent of apocalyptic drive-in films from the 1960s like *Panic in Year Zero!* (1962), Wilde's vision works better as a forerunner to the increasingly graphic

depictions of future shock survivalists like *Dawn of the Dead* (1978, which used biker brutes to similar effect) and George Miller's *Mad Max* cycle.



This bleak vision makes sense especially when one considers the overall trajectory of Wilde's career. Born in 1915 in New York City, he earned a pre-med degree at Columbia University and took up the study of acting with Lee Strasberg. A solid athlete, he qualified for the American Olympic training squad in saber, a skill he utilized in several future swashbuckling roles. After a lucrative career with Fox, he embarked on a career as a jack-of-all-trades in the film industry, serving as an independent producer for a classic film noir, *The Big Combo* (1955). The film marked the beginning of his own production company, Theodora Productions, through which all of his directorial efforts were created. "I really always wanted to direct," Wilde stated in 1970's October issue of *Films & Filming*. "I constantly get stirred about what mankind does, and has done, to mankind. Throughout history. And I think how terrible it is that in so many years of existence, man's primal ways have not changed a great deal. Perhaps they've become more refined, but fundamentally the things that man does to man are just as terrible today as they were six thousand years ago. What goes on in business is just as savage as on a battlefield."

One of the greatest strengths of *No Blade of Grass* is its sturdy English-based cast, headed by stage and screen actor Nigel Davenport, a familiar face from such films as *Peeping Tom* (1960), *In the Cool of the Day* (1963), *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1965), *Phase IV* (1974), and *Chariots of Fire* (1981). John Hamill, who plays traveling companion Roger Burnham, soon appeared in MGM's *Travels with My Aunt* (1972) as well as a clutch of early '70s horror films like *Tower of Evil* (1972) and *The Beast in the Cellar* (1971), while actor Anthony Sharp (as Sir Charles Brenner) had a prominent role the next year at the end of another shocking science fiction film, Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and remains best known to cult film fans for the lead role in Pete Walker's controversial *The Confessional* (1976).

Subjected to perhaps the most memorably brutal scene in the film, actress Lynne Frederick made her debut in Wilde's film and reteamed with Davenport for *Phase IV*, then appeared in *Schizo* (1976) for director Pete Walker. However, she is perhaps most famous as the final and most controversial wife of Peter Sellers; caught in numerous public squabbles with the actor's family after his death in 1980, she retired from acting and died from alcohol-induced complications in 1994.

After *No Blade of Grass*, Wilde returned to the director's chair once more in 1975 for the seafaring adventure, *Sharks' Treasure*, and he continued acting for television and

film until 1987, two years before his death from leukemia. His penultimate film has remained inexplicably difficult to see for many years, only occasionally turning up on the revival circuit and television where it continues to haunt viewers with its all-too-plausible depiction of civilization brought to its knees for crimes against Mother Nature.

Locations include: Huntingdon (the gun shop) & The Lake District. & from Peter Robinson, Feb 2010.

The location for the ambush at the level crossing was Park South, about three miles north of Barrow-in-Furness. The distinctive Furness Railway signal box is still there controlling the crossing but now overlooked by the new route of the A590 into Barrow which is carried over the valley on a viaduct.

The viaduct in the film is very obviously Ribbleshead on the Settle & Carlisle line in the Yorkshire Dales National Park - a long sequence of shots are located in this area with the characteristic outline of Ingleborough, one the three major peaks in the Dales appearing in some shots. You pass Ribbleshead on the B6255 road from Ingleton to Hawes.

I did wonder if the ruined mansion was High Head Castle, near Dalston, south of Carlisle but I could not confirm this. The film does not show the main facade.

The final sequence must be in the Lake District but I could not say where. The quarry shot could also be at Ribbleshead. The quarry was closed then re-opened and is closed again - much to the appreciation of the National Park authority !

Producer/Director: Cornel Wilde

Screenplay: Sean Forestal, Jefferson Pascal, based on the novel by John Christopher

Cinematography: H.A.R. Thomson

Editing: Eric Boyd-Perkins, Frank Clarke

Music: Burnell Whibley

Art Direction: Elliot Scott

Cast: Nigel Davenport (John Custance), Jean Wallace (Ann Custance), John Hamill (Roger Burnham), Lynne Frederick (Mary Custance), Patrick Holt (David Custance), M. J. Matthews (George), Tex Fuller (Mr. Beaseley).

C-95m.

Please note the rape scene, which was deleted from the domestic release, has been restored from a Sat recording.